

**'A view from north of the border': Scotland's 'forgotten' contribution to the history of the prime-time BBC1 contemporary single TV play slot**

Cook, John R.

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## Cover page

Prof. John R. Cook  
Professor of Media  
Department of Social Sciences, Media and Journalism  
Glasgow Caledonian University  
70 Cowcaddens Road  
Glasgow  
Scotland, United Kingdom G4 0BA

*Tel.:* (00 44) 141 331 3845

*Email:* [J.Cook2@gcu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Cook2@gcu.ac.uk)

### Biographical note

John R. Cook is Professor of Media at Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland. He has researched and published extensively in the field of British television drama with specialisms in the works of Dennis Potter, Peter Watkins, British TV science fiction and *The Wednesday Play*. In 2008, he published one of the first academic surveys of the history of Scottish TV drama ('Three Ring Circus...' in N. Blain and D. Hutchison [eds.], *The Media in Scotland*, Edinburgh UP, 2008) and since then he has been involved in a number of research initiatives to try to draw greater attention to the rich history of TV drama in Scotland, including an invitation to speak on this issue at the Scottish Parliament in 2017.

**‘A View from North of the Border’: Scotland’s “Forgotten” Contribution to the History of the Prime-Time BBC1 Contemporary Single TV Play Slot**

**John R. Cook**

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**Abstract**

This article surveys BBC Scotland's "forgotten" contribution to the history of the prime-time contemporary TV play slot on BBC1, including its contributions to *The Wednesday Play* (BBC TV, 1964-70) and its later leading involvement with *The Play on One* (BBC TV, 1988-91), following the demise of the London-produced *Play for Today* slot (BBC TV, 1970-84). The article argues that Scotland's contribution to TV drama has been historically a rich one and that it is important to remember this today as BBC Scotland struggles to compete with BBC Wales in the wake of the latter's designation as a national "Drama Hub".

**Keywords**

Scotland, Television drama, BBC, Single play, 1960s, 1980s, Nations and regions, Thatcherism

## Introduction: A View from the Present

In the twenty-first century, Scotland now sometimes seems a backwater with regard to the production of TV drama in Britain. Northern Ireland houses the global TV hit *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011 –). Wales has seen spectacular growth in the last decade largely on the back of the successful revival of *Doctor Who* (BBC TV, 2005 –), which is produced in Cardiff. Scotland has struggled a little in comparison. Notwithstanding the notable exception of hit US series *Outlander* (Sony / Left Bank for Starz, 2014 –), which uses a purpose-built facility in Cumbernauld, Scotland seems in recent years to have got rather bogged down in endless debates about the location of a future national film and TV studio.<sup>1</sup> This might seem surprising, given that out of all the UK “nations and regions” Scotland is today undoubtedly the most self-conscious of its own national identity and distinctiveness from London, the most devolved politically and on a possible road to independence.

In terms of the BBC, still the biggest producer of TV drama in the UK for domestic consumption, the slippage has been tangible. There has been a noticeable “*Doctor Who* effect” on nations and regions TV drama. The revived show’s unexpected success – initially under Welsh-born showrunner Russell T. Davies and original executive producer Julie Gardner (both of whom were instrumental in bringing the series to Cardiff)<sup>2</sup> – has had knock-on effects. Suddenly Cardiff, which had not previously been seen as a big player in UK TV drama, came to be designated by the BBC as a national “Drama Hub”. A new drama facility was built at Roath Lock within the city and network productions like the long-running *Casualty* (BBC TV, 1986 –), which had been previously filmed in Bristol, were relocated to it. BBC TV’s Drama Department in Scotland has struggled to compete with Cardiff’s huge rise in status. In recent years, it has tried, amongst other genre ventures<sup>3</sup>, to find a niche with adaptations of crime novels such as *Case Histories* (BBC TV, 2011-13), *The Field of Blood*

(BBC TV, 2011 – 13), *Stonemouth* (BBC TV, 2015) and *Shetland* (BBC TV, 2013 –). But these dramas, often commissioned for runs of a few episodes and (in the case of the first three) networked by the BBC in the summer period, inevitably lack the presence and impact of big long-running “brands” like *Doctor Who* and *Casualty*.

Things were not always so. One of the most important aspects of researching and writing about the history of TV drama is the politics of remembering – of recovering histories in danger of being forgotten or overlooked with a view to showing that the way things are now is not the way things have always been or have to be in the future.<sup>4</sup> Up until Cardiff’s mid-2000s ascent, Scotland in many ways functioned as a second centre of BBC TV drama production outside of London, with a rich history of success stretching back to the late 1950s and far exceeding the output of any of the other small UK nations.<sup>5</sup>

This article will trace one aspect of that rich history: Scotland’s “forgotten” contribution to the prime-time contemporary single TV play slot on BBC1. The one-off single drama is now, of course, an increasingly rare sight within British TV schedules, though it does still exist as a somewhat marginal form. But up until the mid-1980s, the single studio play or one-off film was at the heart of BBC TV drama production and widely regarded as a key measure of the BBC’s public service broadcasting remit. Although it had become increasingly less prominent in ITV production by the 1970s, the single TV play at the BBC continued to function as a special space for the expression of ‘the individual, dissident or questioning voice.’<sup>6</sup> It provided a platform as well as a training ground for writers (or ‘television playwrights’ as they were often called) to experiment and express themselves outside of the perceived constraints of series and serial production. Indeed, the history of

British TV drama overall is inextricably bound up with the history of the single TV play. Television drama in Britain began as theatre adaptations before gradually progressing to the commissioning of original one-off dramas specially made for television. It was only later that serial and series production began to dominate.<sup>7</sup>

Scotland played a decisive role at key moments within this history: thus, uncovering the hitherto largely overlooked history of TV drama in Scotland enriches understanding not only of a local context of production but also the history of British TV drama as a whole. As this article will show, it was from Scotland that inspiration was drawn for BBC1's *The Wednesday Play* slot (BBC TV, 1964-70), which became a ground-breaking intervention within British television drama history. Later, when the contemporary single TV play began to fall out of favour in London during the 1980s, it was Scotland which took up the mantle and provided one last gasp of life for that tradition on prime-time BBC1. In a sense, therefore, the story of the single TV play in Scotland is also the story of the rise and fall of the BBC single TV play more generally.

The following article is structured into two main sections, titled "Rise" and "Fall", that survey Scotland's contribution to the rise and fall of the BBC single TV play. Though there were other slots for single drama across BBC TV to which BBC Scotland made periodic contributions, this discussion's principal focus is on the prime-time BBC1 contemporary play slot. Over the course of its history, this slot tended to draw the largest mass audiences for original plays on BBC TV. "Rise" examines the beginnings of TV play production in Scotland and the decisive role that Scotland came to play in the birth of *The Wednesday Play*. "Fall" considers how, with the 1980s demise of *Play for Today* (BBC TV,

1970-84) and the determination of BBC management in London to move to all-film production in order to compete with Channel Four, BBC Scotland was tasked with reviving a weekly titled single play (as opposed to film) slot on prime-time BBC1 for what ultimately proved to be the last time. Though the overall production aim turned out to be unsuccessful, some of the resulting output was not without interest and the whole history has tended to be neglected in wider scholarly discussion of the single TV play.

### **Rise: From J.M. Barrie to *The Wednesday Play***

Sixteen years after the initial launch of a BBC TV service in London, television officially came to Scotland on March 14, 1952. To mark the occasion, the first televised play from Scotland was networked to UK audiences in the same week: a live broadcast from the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre of its production of J. M. Barrie's 1918 play, *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* (tx. 19.03.52). More theatrical relays followed: on August 12, 1952, a live broadcast from the Citizens' of *The Black Eye* (written by the Theatre's co-founder, James Bridie) was networked. The production is perhaps most notable for its casting of a young Scots actor, James MacTaggart (1928-74), in the lead part, while further down the cast list was Pharic Maclaren (1923-80). In succeeding years, both men would switch away from acting, eventually becoming leading BBC TV drama producers in Scotland.

Maclaren had joined the BBC in London in 1953 as a temporary holiday relief studio manager. He stayed there for four years mainly working on children's TV programmes. In 1957, following a stint working on the children's comedy drama series *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School* (BBC TV, 1952-61), Maclaren moved back to Scotland and began to



produce one-off original television plays from BBC Scotland's then very modest temporary TV facilities in Glasgow.<sup>8</sup> The difficulties networked Scottish plays faced at this time in gaining acceptance from southern critics, in view of the overwhelming concentration of finances, production energies and physical resources in London, were noticeable. *The Times* complained of 'the mediocre output of the BBC's Scottish studio'; it was only when Maclaren turned his *Billy Bunter*-honed comedy drama skills to a series playing more on received images of Scottishness – *Para Handy – Master Mariner* (BBC TV, 1959 – 60) – that the newspaper felt able to lavish praise for the 'cohesion' of this particular offering.<sup>9</sup>

*Para Handy* provided other opportunities as well. Episode Four, 'The Prize Canary' (tx. 08.01.60), was directed by James MacTaggart<sup>10</sup>, who first joined BBC Scotland in 1956 and worked alongside Maclaren throughout the late 1950s, also directing a few plays from the Glasgow studio for the UK network. In keeping with his acting roots at the Citizens' Theatre, adaptations of James Bridie plays were a particular focus of MacTaggart's.<sup>11</sup> In 1960, however, the BBC, in a search for new TV playwriting talent, instituted a contemporary Scottish playwriting competition presided over by judges including Donald Wilson, Scottish-born Head of the BBC TV Script Unit in London. The winning play was *Three Ring Circus*, by new-to-TV writer Jack Gerson. MacTaggart produced and directed it from the BBC Glasgow studio for UK network transmission on February 2, 1961.<sup>12</sup>

Lez Cooke has described *Three Ring Circus* as the "'ur-drama" in a tradition leading to *The Wednesday Play* and beyond'.<sup>13</sup> Though Cooke records that the play received an 'outstandingly low'<sup>14</sup> reaction index from audiences, nevertheless it made professional colleagues as well as TV reviewers sit up and take notice. Introducing the play in that week's

*Radio Times*, Donald Wilson praised a ‘parable of modern times’, asserting that its greatest virtue was perhaps ‘its power to stimulate the imagination of those concerned in its production’.<sup>15</sup> This was echoed in the following day’s *Times* review, which hailed MacTaggart’s production under the headline ‘Imagination Unleashed’. In stark contrast to the newspaper’s previous charges of ‘mediocre output’ from the BBC’s Scottish studio, the *Times* reviewer praised the play’s ‘stylized acting and elaborately fantastic production’<sup>16</sup> in terms of its realization of Gerson’s existentialist premise of a young man who loses his memory and goes on a search for his identity within a fictionalized European police state.

MacTaggart, stimulated by the imagination of the play, had managed to disguise the limited resources of his Scottish studio through using its space inventively, via expressionist-style techniques, to portray a crisis of identity in the modern world. Cooke points to ‘MacTaggart’s inclusion of rapid montages of still images in *Three Ring Circus*, alongside complex studio takes recorded on minimal “expressionist” sets’ as the play’s chief stylistic innovations, arguing that these are suggestive ‘of a cinematic modernism associated with Eisenstein and the avant-garde filmmakers of the nineteen twenties’.<sup>17</sup> This was a new kind of modernist drama for British television: instantly, it brought MacTaggart to the attention of BBC drama staff in London where there was a similar desire for visual experimentation amongst a new generation of “young Turks” such as Troy Kennedy Martin, John McGrath and Roger Smith.

By the summer of 1961, MacTaggart had been seconded to London to work with writer Kennedy Martin and others on *Storyboard*, the first of three successive experimental play series (the others being *Studio 4* [BBC TV, 1962] and *Teletale* [BBC TV, 1963-64])

with which MacTaggart was centrally involved as director and producer. Together with the MacTaggart-produced six-part BBC1 serial *Diary of a Young Man* (tx. 08.08.64 – 12.09.64)<sup>18</sup>, co-written by Troy Kennedy Martin and John McGrath and co-directed by Ken Loach and Peter Duguid, these essentially laid the groundwork for what Kennedy Martin labelled a ‘new drama for television’.<sup>19</sup> The aim of that ‘new drama’ was to free the grammar of television from what was regarded as the naturalistic ‘tyranny of faces talking and faces reacting’,<sup>20</sup> in order to tell a story in more exciting visual terms. Elwyn Jones, for example, argued in 1961 that: ‘To tell a story in visual terms: that, and simply that, is the aim of *Storyboard*; to take the work of accomplished writers and translate it to the screen’.<sup>21</sup>

These successes were rewarded when Sydney Newman, the Head of BBC TV drama since January 1963, invited MacTaggart to produce *The Wednesday Play*. Newman had admired MacTaggart’s direction of a play which Newman had produced in his native Canada: *Flight into Danger* (tx. 05.02.62). When the position of producer of *First Night*, the BBC’s Sunday night contemporary play slot became vacant in April 1964, Newman gave it to MacTaggart. After the slot was moved from Sundays to Wednesday evenings, MacTaggart became the producer of *The Wednesday Play* for the first, crucial year of this new prime-time contemporary single play slot. The MacTaggart-produced *Wednesday Plays* were transmitted from January 6, 1965 to December 22, 1965 (including a four-month break from June to October that year) and began with *A Tap on the Shoulder*, a heist drama written by James O’Connor and directed by Ken Loach. During the course of his year as producer, MacTaggart provided a famous and influential showcase for new writing and directing talents including Dennis Potter (*The Nigel Barton Plays* [tx. 08.12.65 and 15.12.65] and Loach (*Up The Junction* [tx. 03.11.65]).<sup>22</sup> In making the move down south to London, MacTaggart had helped change the face of British television drama.<sup>23</sup> It is important to be aware, however,

that his considerable inspiration and leadership in this regard had had its roots in his early work in Scotland.

MacTaggart produced thirty five *Wednesday Plays* over the course of 1965 prior to resigning, tired of the pressures involved in finding and bringing so many new TV plays to the screen and wishing to return to freelance directing.<sup>24</sup> But with so many weekly slots to fill during that year, the constant need for plays and MacTaggart's native connections created new opportunities for Scotland. Two of the batch of *Wednesday Plays* transmitted in the first half of 1965 were recorded at BBC Scotland's Glasgow Studio, albeit neither had a specifically Scottish theme: *A Little Temptation* (wr.: Thomas Clarke; dir.: Peter Duguid, tx. 17.03.65) and *Cat's Cradle* (wr.: Hugo Charteris; dir.: Henric Hirsch, tx. 31.03.65).<sup>25</sup> Later, however, in that crucial first contemporary season under MacTaggart, Scotland provided the primary inspiration and locations for *A Knight in Tarnished Armour* (wr.: Alan Sharp; dir.: John Gorrie, tx. 12.05.65).

An autobiographical play by Greenock-born writer Alan Sharp, *A Knight in Tarnished Armour* used Glasgow locations for its film sequences, was written and performed in a Glasgow patois, and featured a strong cast of Scots actors, including Paul Young and Paul Curran in the leading roles. An idealistic teenage dreamer, Tom (Young), goes to work for a private detective, Mr. Burnshaw (Curran), as his assistant. Tom thinks he is going to live out a fantasy world of Raymond Chandler novels but instead comes up short against the seedy reality of work for Burnshaw.<sup>26</sup> Reviewing the play the Sunday after transmission, *The Observer's* TV critic, Maurice Richardson, praised the authenticity of the dialogue but felt the play overdid the contrast between 'Tom's Walter Mitty quixotic fantasies and the squalid

reality'.<sup>27</sup> The painful gap between the idealistic fantasies of youth and the grim realities of life "in the provinces" was a common contemporary trope, with Keith Waterhouse's 1959 novel *Billy Liar* and its subsequent stage (1960) and cinematic (1963) incarnations possibly its best-known expression. But the subject of disenfranchised youth was also a frequent one for *The Wednesday Play* as it sought to take forward Sydney Newman's original brief for a prime-time contemporary play slot that would be more attractive to younger audiences and would explore what Newman termed the 'turning points' of 1960s society.<sup>28</sup> Dennis Potter's *Where the Buffalo Roam* (dir.: Gareth Davies; tx. BBC-1 02.11.66), for example, revolved around a troubled working-class youth who is stuck not in Glasgow but Swansea, yet who dreams a similarly impossible, pop culture-fuelled dream to that of *A Knight in Tarnished Armour*'s Tom: this time, of being a Wild West cowboy rather than a Chandleresque detective.<sup>29</sup>

*Where the Buffalo Roam* and *A Knight in Tarnished Armour* illustrate how, in its concern to widen the sphere of televisual representation of contemporary British society by actively embracing depiction of hitherto marginalised groups such as the young and the working class, *The Wednesday Play* was interested in seeking out new play subjects from across the whole of the UK in its quest to fill its many broadcast slots.<sup>30</sup> After 1965 and the departure of MacTaggart as producer, Scotland was able to continue this link. In each remaining year of the *Wednesday Play* slot (until its retitling and move to a new day of the week as *Play for Today* in the autumn of 1970), Pharic Maclaren produced and directed from BBC Scotland one contemporary Scottish TV play per season which was networked to UK audiences. This was significant and said much about the relative status of BBC Scotland TV drama at this time. None of the other UK nations and regions was afforded this privilege and no other practitioner besides Maclaren was allowed a producer credit on *The Wednesday*

*Play*, separate from the appointees designated by London to oversee each particular season of it.<sup>31</sup> Writing a progress report for his organisation in 1969, the then recently appointed Controller of BBC Scotland, Alasdair Milne, hailed Pharic Maclaren's track record of success in TV drama as having created a 'first class working relationship with the network people'<sup>32</sup> in London that in turn allowed such opportunities to continue and to develop.

Four Maclaren-produced-and-directed plays were showcased in *The Wednesday Play* slot over successive years. The first two of these, *A Black Candle for Mrs Gogarty* (tx. 25.10.67) and *The Lower Largo Sequence* (tx. 09.10.68), were written by Ayrshire-born Edward ('Eddie') Boyd (1916-89), an experienced writer of TV crime drama whose credits included the creation of the successful series *The Odd Man* (Granada, 1960-63) for ITV. *A Black Candle* largely mined a similar underworld milieu, though with the added quirky premise of a gentleman conman figure, the Crocus (Duncan Macrae), who finds himself blackmailed into marriage to the eponymous Mrs Gogarty (Peggy Marshall). The production was notable as Macrae's last performance (he died the day after work on it was completed), but reviewers generally criticized it as at times too slow, and thus out of step with the *Wednesday Play* slot's faster-paced, contemporary house style.<sup>33</sup> Lessons may have been learned for Maclaren and Boyd's next *Wednesday Play* collaboration. *The Lower Largo Sequence* was altogether different, revolving around an age-gap love affair within the small Fife village of Lower Largo between a solitary, ageing novelist (Patrick Allen) and the young girl (Isobel Black) he first meets at a party in Glasgow. *The Lower Largo Sequence* was a more formally ambitious play than *A Black Candle*, incorporating flashbacks, dream sequences, captions and verse recitations as the play portrayed the inevitable strain and breakdown of the couple's relationship. Because of these stylistic challenges, Maclaren cited it as one of his favourites to direct.<sup>34</sup>

Maclaren's final two *Wednesday Play* productions mined more stereotypical territory, however: both were set in Glasgow and played on the city's traditional tough image. Though written by a Welsh writer, Ray Jenkins, *Patterson O.K.* (tx. 08.10.69) featured an all-Scottish cast and used extensive amounts of location film shooting, two thirds of it in and around Glasgow.<sup>35</sup> One of Maclaren's grittier productions to date, it drew on well-worked crime staples of unpaid debts and Glasgow hard men in its exploration of the problems of growing up as a teenager in the city. Similar issues of the "problem" of being young in Glasgow were approached from a different angle in *The Boy Who Wanted Peace* (tx. 25.02.70), an adaptation by George Friel (1910-75) of his own 1964 "Glasgow tenement" novel. Both novel and TV play revolve around a gang of underprivileged Glasgow schoolboys who stumble upon crates of stolen cash in their school basement but then have the difficult task of trying to reach some kind of rational consensus as to how to make best use of their unexpected windfall.

By the time *The Boy Who Wanted Peace* aired in February 1970, Maclaren had stepped back from directing owing to a heart attack the year before.<sup>36</sup> But throughout the 1970s, he remained a production powerhouse of Scottish TV drama, responsible (as producer) for fifty per cent of the whole of BBC Scotland's TV drama output, all achieved despite having been confined to a wheelchair with polio since 1962.<sup>37</sup> The output overall of BBC Scotland's TV Drama Department during the 1970s was diverse, embracing series and serials as well as single TV plays and including successful examples of networked crime drama (*Sutherland's Law* [1973-76]), adaptations of classic Scottish novels (*Sunset Song* [1971], an award-winning six-part adaptation of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's novel for which

Maclaren remains chiefly remembered as a producer) and political thrillers (*Scotch on the Rocks* [1973], produced by Maclaren from a script by James MacTaggart; *Running Blind* [1979] and *The Assassination Run* [1980]). Production of TV drama was rated BBC Scotland's biggest network success during this period. By February 1977, industry journal *The Stage and Television Today* was urging that 'Scots actors should take the next train North', with no fewer than thirty four hours of drama planned at BBC Scotland between April and December of that year, the vast majority of which (twenty seven hours) was intended for UK network consumption.<sup>38</sup>

### **Fall: From *Play for Today* to *The Play on One***

In spite of his involvement with a diverse portfolio of 1970s BBC Scotland TV drama output, Maclaren continued to make sporadic production contributions to *The Wednesday Play*'s successor series, *Play for Today*, mainly in the form of adaptations of successful Scottish theatre plays. One such was *Willie Rough* (tx. 16.03.76), Maclaren's production of Bill Bryden's acclaimed theatre play about the Red Clydesiders of 1914-16. In 1978, Maclaren received an MBE for services to TV drama; on his unexpected death in 1980, he was described in obituaries as the practitioner who had probably done more than any other 'to set and maintain the standards of television drama in Scotland'.<sup>39</sup> Roderick Graham, who had been appointed Head of TV Drama at BBC Scotland in 1976 to work alongside Maclaren, insisted that it was now the challenge for his department to make sure these standards lived on.<sup>40</sup> Graham continued in post until 1984, operating in a changing landscape of increasing competition in television and tighter finances, and finally decided to return to production duties in April 1984. His successor, appointed that December, was the Greenock-born theatre director and playwright, Bill Bryden. Backed up by BBC Scotland-based producer Norman



McCandlish as his Chief Assistant, the terms of Bryden's appointment allowed him to do the job part-time, combining it with his existing duties as Associate Director of the National Theatre in London. Bryden handled those responsibilities jointly until his departure from BBC Scotland in 1993. With Bryden retaining a very firm foot in London, BBC Scotland hoped he would act as a magnet for attracting national and international talent, co-production monies and prestigious network commissions to Scotland.<sup>41</sup>

Amongst the first fruits of Bryden's tenure was BBC Scotland's production of his play *The Holy City* (tx. 28.03.86), a reimagining of the life and death of Christ set on the streets of contemporary Glasgow and starring David Hayman as a mysterious stranger preaching a message of love and hope. But Bryden's time at BBC Scotland is chiefly remembered for a very different production. *Tutti Frutti* (1987) was a six-part comedy drama serial written by playwright and painter John Byrne and centred on the comeback of an ageing rock 'n' roll group, 'The Majestics'. First transmitted in spring 1987, it won great acclaim, including no less than six BAFTA awards in 1988, amongst them Best Serial / Series and Best Actress (for Emma Thompson). Suddenly, BBC Scotland was offering a vibrant alternative to London as a creative hub for TV drama production. By the time *Tutti Frutti* first aired, Bryden had a slate of single TV plays already in production.<sup>42</sup> In a marked change from the previous Pharic Maclaren / Roderick Graham regime, the new emphasis was on individually distinctive, and above all, writer-driven dramas reflecting contemporary Scotland, rather than serialized adaptations of Scottish literary classics or historical costume epics.<sup>43</sup>

Bryden's background as a writer and theatre director meant he was particularly receptive to the development and nurturing of Scottish writing talent. According to drama director Mike Alexander, who worked at BBC Scotland in the early 1990s:

What Bill was brilliant at was going down to London and getting the money. He took people under his wing like Peter McDougall and [novelist] William McIlvanney. I don't know how many new people he got in but he certainly created a substantial body of work when he was there. And of course, he loved writers: television drama for him was writer-driven.<sup>44</sup>

Bryden's innate understanding of writers helped him bring Peter McDougall into the BBC Scotland fold. A fellow son of Greenock like Bryden, McDougall had emerged in the 1970s to become perhaps Scotland's leading writer of original television plays. In 1975, his BBC play *Just Another Saturday* (dir.: John Mackenzie; tx. 13.03.75), an unflinching exploration of sectarianism centred round the annual Protestant Orange Day parades through Glasgow, - won the International Prix Italia for Drama. All of McDougall's plays were set in contemporary Scotland, explored tough working-class themes such as sectarianism, Glasgow "hard man" culture and urban deprivation, and featured indigenous casts speaking in broad lowland Scots. Yet McDougall had always eschewed BBC Scotland in order to be commissioned and produced from London, having first been discovered by *Play for Today* as an authentic new voice of lived working-class experience after fellow TV playwright and actor Colin Welland encountered McDougall when the latter was painting his house and Welland encouraged him to write.<sup>45</sup>

Ever the mover and shaker, Bryden now not only enlisted McDougall for BBC Scotland but on a 1986 trip to New York showed McDougall's latest television script, *Down Where the Buffalo Go*, to the Hollywood actor Harvey Keitel. The latter agreed, on the strength of the script, to come to Scotland to play the lead role of Carl, an American patrolman stationed at the nuclear submarine base at the Holy Loch whose marriage with a local woman has reached breaking point.<sup>46</sup> Bryden had put together a formidable star package to showcase McDougall's new script, but at a time when the BBC as a whole was moving away from the writer-driven single play format. 1984 had marked the last season of *Play for Today* after a fourteen-year run. There was no longer a weekly titled slot in the BBC schedules for the contemporary single TV play. The 1982 launch of Channel Four, with its *Film on Four* initiative involving the financing of British films with television money for initial potential theatrical release followed by later TV screening, had made the model of the BBC single TV play suddenly look rather passé. The BBC decided to follow suit by ditching the *Play for Today* slot and launching its own all-film drama slot, *Screen Two*, in January 1985.<sup>47</sup>

One problem with this move, however, was that films took longer to produce and get to the screen, which could militate against the tackling of topical subject matter. In addition, the expense of film drama meant fewer projects could be made. The frequent requirement for co-production monies also had the potential effect of compromising or even stymieing particularly controversial ideas for new works. Because of this, there was a feeling amongst certain practitioners that, with the demise of *Play for Today*, something had been lost in British television drama culture. This view was most influentially articulated at the end of

1985 by Alasdair Milne, now Director-General of the BBC. In an interview with industry trade journal *Broadcast*, Milne made clear his view that ‘we haven’t got the contemporary play sorted out yet... and we have to work that back... There’s some more grist required. We are determined that the commitment to the single play will continue’.<sup>48</sup> Six months later, Peter Goodchild, Head of BBC TV Plays, responded to various industry and institutional criticisms by announcing the prospective return of *Play for Today*, which he had previously ‘rested’ in 1984.: A new set of contemporary plays for BBC1 would go into production: ‘All will be shot on video and will air on a Tuesday night in a 21.30 or 22.00 slot’.<sup>49</sup>

At the time of this announcement, Goodchild and Michael Grade, Controller of BBC1, were still discussing who would be series producer for the new initiative. But BBC Scotland under Bill Bryden, with its “old-school” commitment to writer-driven single drama, was a natural fit. Thus, Scotland took up the mantle of reviving the prime-time contemporary TV play slot on BBC1 at a time when London-based producers were eschewing it in favour of a move to all-film drama financed by co-production money within what Goodchild labelled the more ‘commercially-minded BBC drama department’<sup>50</sup> of the 1980s. From London’s point of view, hiving off the contemporary single TV play slot to the nations and regions provided distance from a format and brand it judged ‘uncommercial’ and ‘tired’<sup>51</sup>, yet one which the BBC had nevertheless felt politically necessary to revive. At the same time, this move also allowed network centre to continue relatively unimpeded in its painful transition towards making feature films in order to compete with Channel Four. If new TV single plays, more cheaply made and shot mainly on video, died with audiences, then at least blame would be attributable elsewhere.<sup>52</sup>

In this way, BBC Scotland provided one last gasp for the single contemporary TV play slot on primetime BBC1, now retitled as *The Play on One* (1988-91). On January 19 1988, it launched this strand with a fanfare via the transmission of Peter McDougall's *Down Where the Buffalo Go*, starring Harvey Keitel and networked to the whole of the UK in the old *Play for Today* slot: Tuesday evenings on BBC1 at 21.30. Unlike the old *Play for Today*s, however, there were far fewer *Play on Ones* per season. In the first season, for example, a total of eight plays were transmitted, compared to a typical per season average of at least twenty *Play for Today*s earlier that decade.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to the general trend of London's drama policy moving towards film production, BBC Scotland's commitment to *The Play on One* as an "authored" showcase for the work of TV playwrights was explicitly flagged within the strand's generic title sequence. This featured a black-and-white portrait photograph of the writer of a given week's play, complete with an animated graphic of their signature scrawling itself on the screen underneath.

The majority of these "signature" plays were produced by Bill Bryden's Drama Department in Glasgow. But over *The Play on One*'s four short seasons, both BBC Pebble Mill in Birmingham and BBC Wales contributed plays to the slot.<sup>54</sup> In this way, the BBC "nations and regions" combined resources to keep alive a televisual tradition which London was no longer invested in producing. Indeed, one of the Pebble Mill plays, *Airbase*, an adaptation by Malcolm McKay of his 1985 theatre play of the same name (dir.: David Attwood, tx. 01.03.88), proved the most controversial of the whole series' run, due to its depiction of soldiers at a US military airbase as 'a pack of drunk, drug-crazed, Red-hating, nuke-loving cowboys more likely to start a nuclear war than prevent it'.<sup>55</sup> In the tradition of earlier controversial *Play for Today*s, "Clean-Up TV" campaigner Mary Whitehouse

complained; questions were asked in the House of Lords; and even Number Ten reportedly asked for a copy to see for itself what all the fuss was about.<sup>56</sup>

Operating in an era of increased competition in television, *The Play on One* made liberal use of stars in order to entice audiences to tune in. Many big names were happy for the opportunity to appear in what was by this point the increasingly rare form of the single television play. Besides Harvey Keitel, other stars who appeared in the series' run included Rosanna Arquette, Diana Rigg, Anthony Hopkins, James Fox, Colin Firth and Catherine Zeta-Jones.<sup>57</sup> The slot also provided an opportunity (perhaps even a refuge) for practitioners who had distinguished themselves in previous eras of the single TV play to continue to work on new projects outside of what one such figure, the left-wing playwright Trevor Griffiths, derided contemporarily as the 'film-flam'<sup>58</sup> policy of London commissioners. Thus, established writers like Alun Owen and Alan Plater made contributions to *The Play on One*<sup>59</sup> as well as directors like Gareth Davies, Barry Davis and Roy Battersby.<sup>60</sup>

Bryden's BBC Scotland Drama Department also used the slot to showcase a range of new Scottish writing. Besides McDougall's *Down Where The Buffalo Go*, *The Play on One*'s first season also featured a new TV play by John Byrne (*Normal Service*, tx. 02.02.88) as well as Iain Heggie's adaptation of his award-winning Royal Court Theatre comedy drama, *A Wholly Healthy Glasgow* (tx. 16.02.88). A recurring theme of the Scottish-set *Play on Ones* involved ageing radical Clydesiders facing up to the changes wrought by Thatcherism, including the decline of heavy industry and the collapse of the traditional Left. Both *The Dunroamin' Rising* (wr.: Colin Macdonald; dir.: Moira Armstrong, tx. 09.02.88), in which a retired revolutionary leads a revolt in an old people's home, and *Govan Ghost Story* (wr.:

Bryan Elsley; dir.: David Hayman, tx. 07.03.89), a supernatural drama in which Jock, an unemployed former Upper Clyde Shipyard activist, is both literally and metaphorically haunted by the ghosts of his past, explored this territory in different ways. Here, there was a sense of Scotland offering up to the rest of the UK images of late-1980s British society that were very different to those increasingly on offer from the more prosperous, Thatcherite South. Shot mainly on video, rather than more expensive film, these networked Scottish plays set out to show the country that not all was well within the Thatcherite socio-political settlement.

One play which encapsulated this in an almost stereotypical fashion was *A View of Harry Clark* (wr.: Daniel Boyle; dir.: Alastair Reid, tx. 21.03.89).<sup>61</sup> In keeping with the slot's practice of using star names to draw audiences, this play starred Griff Rhys Jones and Elaine Paige. Both, however, were cast in very different roles from their usual comic and musical theatre personae respectively. Jones played the eponymous Harry, a social worker who, as he goes around an unspecified northern city (it is never made quite clear whether this is located in Northern England or Central Scotland), finds himself in increasing despair at the social wreckage he encounters and the walking wounded he has to help pick up and put back together again. Harry takes to drink, unable to cope with the pressures of his job. His wife Anne (played by Paige) grows increasingly concerned about him. Finally, Harry cracks and, haunted by all the terrible things he has seen, smothers to death his young daughter. She was the only thing he truly loved in his life and tragically he thinks he has managed to save her from witnessing all the horrors of the world he encountered in the course of his social worker duties.

As can be surmised from this bald summary, the gloom of this material was wholly unrelieved and laid on rather too thick. *A View of Harry Clark* was never going to gladden the hearts of a watching nation – with the possible exception, perhaps, of the rival broadcasters. Nevertheless, for those who did tune in on the strength of the play's two stars, this was indeed a very different northern “view” which was being offered in stark contrast to received late-1980s images and illusions of Britain as a booming, prosperous nation under the strong and determined premiership of Margaret Thatcher. Here, instead, was an odyssey around the lower depths that concerned itself with those forgotten and left behind by a national journey towards unbridled consumerism and untrammelled corporate wealth. This was a very different kind of image from those associated with contemporaneous discourses of upwardly mobile London Yuppies on the rise and on the make, typified in mainstream TV dramas such as Euston Films' series *Capital City* (ITV, 1989-90), set in the City of London during the financial boom years of the late '80s. Scotland, by means of its revival of the contemporary single TV play, had constructed an alternative stance of resistance: a last public service-informed stand of “authenticity” in perceived reaction to inauthentic and commercialized ‘film-flam’ representations increasingly emanating at this time from Southern production companies and centres.

### **Conclusion: The Politics of Remembering**

In his poem concluding the famous British documentary film *Night Mail* (Dirs.: Basil Wright and Harry Watt, GPO, 1936), W.H. Auden wrote: ‘Who can bear to feel himself forgotten?’ As the film ends with the Royal Mail night train entering Edinburgh, bringing letters to Scotland from people in London and the South, its underlying ideological message is one of national integration: Scotland deserved to be very much remembered, not least in



light of the poverty and mass unemployment which had particularly afflicted it during the Great Depression.<sup>62</sup> Produced in the late 1980s at a broadly equivalent time of mass unemployment and a stark North-South economic divide, *A View of Harry Clark* also attempted to remember the forgotten people of “the North”; in this case, offering an antidote to increasingly dominant southern British TV representations of a world of conspicuous consumption and upward mobility.

By the same token, surveying the histories of BBC Scotland’s contributions to TV drama and to the single TV play in particular, which are in danger of being overlooked or forgotten today, involves a similar politics of remembering. Ultimately, it is important to remember that BBC Scotland used to punch well above its weight in TV drama, both in terms of numbers of productions and network commissions. The way things are now, given Scotland’s undoubted slippage in the era of “the TARDIS in Cardiff”, is not the way things always were or have to be in the future. As this article has shown, BBC Scotland was once a leading producer of TV drama in the UK. Given the right combination of policies, personnel, support and resources, there is no reason why it could not be so again.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In April 2017, the Scottish Government finally approved in principle a plan for Scotland’s first purpose-built film and TV studio near Edinburgh, though at the time of writing this still has many planning permission obstacles to clear. *Outlander* uses a warehouse facility in Cumbernauld for filming, which the Scottish Government helped pay to convert in time for the start of principal production in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> There is an irony here, in that Davies’ successor from 2010-17 was Scots-born writer Steven Moffat. Over the course of his tenure, Moffat filled many of the key roles in *Doctor Who* with Scots actors, including Peter Capaldi as the Doctor and Michelle Gomez as Missy (both 2014-17).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the original short-run thriller serials *The Replacement* (tx. BBC-1 28.02.17 – 14.03.17) and *Clique* (first released BBC Three online, 05.03.17 – 09.04.17).

<sup>4</sup> With the renewal of its Royal Charter at the end of 2016, there has been a renewed commitment by the BBC towards greater representation of the nations and regions, including in the important area of TV drama. Under the new Charter, the Scottish Parliament, for the first time, can hold the BBC to account for the latter’s policies

in Scotland. The Parliament has taken a particular interest in TV drama: see, for example, the January 2017 deliberations of the Scottish Parliament's cross-cultural advisory group- <http://www.cpgonculture.com/previous-meetings/17th-january-2017/> [Accessed September 26, 2017].

<sup>5</sup> See Cook, 'Three Ring Circus'.

<sup>6</sup> Cook, *Dennis Potter*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Cooke, *British Television Drama* and Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen*.

<sup>8</sup> Though BBC Scotland's television facilities were very modest and *ad hoc* in the late 1950s, bigger, permanent TV studio facilities were opened at Queen Margaret Drive, Glasgow in spring 1964. For a time, these were regarded as state-of-the-art within the BBC as a whole, on account of their capacity to produce programmes on the new 625 lines technical standard.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., 'Amiable Rogues on Shipboard', 9. Besides the original *Para Handy* series, there have been two other BBC Scotland adaptations of the 'Para Handy' short stories by Neil Munro: *The Vital Spark* (1965-66 in black and white; 1973-74 in colour – both produced by McLaren) and *The Tales of Para Handy* (1994-95).

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of MacTaggart's career, see Wake, 'James MacTaggart'.

<sup>11</sup> The two James Bridie plays MacTaggart directed were *Meeting at Night* (tx. 02.04.59) and *Mr. Gillie* (tx. 12.06.60).

<sup>12</sup> At this stage there was no credited distinction within BBC TV between producing and directing plays; this only pertained for serials and series. This situation would later change when Sydney Newman became Head of BBC TV Drama in 1963 and instituted a system of separate producers and directors for TV plays.

<sup>13</sup> Cooke, 'Three Ring Circus', 438.

<sup>14</sup> BBC Audience Research Report, February 20, 1961, cited in *ibid.* Cooke records that *Three Ring Circus* achieved an audience reaction index of twenty eight, when the average for regional plays during this period was sixty seven.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, 'Three Ring Circus'.

<sup>16</sup> Anon., 'Imagination Unleashed'.

<sup>17</sup> Cooke, 'Three Ring Circus', 432.

<sup>18</sup> *Diary of a Young Man* revolved around two young Northern lads coming to London. It employed a whole series of then-innovative techniques to distinguish itself from looking like filmed theatre and to create a sense of visual excitement: use of voice-over, montage sequences of still images, jumps in chronology and surreal and absurd sequences. For further discussion of *Diary*, see Cooke, *Troy Kennedy Martin*, 56-97.

<sup>19</sup> The sub-title of Troy Kennedy Martin's famous manifesto against theatrical-style naturalism in TV drama (which he published, provocatively, in the theatre journal *Encore*): Kennedy Martin, 'Nats Go Home'.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, 'Storyboard', 51. Elwyn Jones was the Assistant Head of BBC TV Drama in 1961.

<sup>22</sup> Six plays, produced by Peter Luke, had been screened previously under *The Wednesday Play* banner in the winter of 1964. These were actually hold-overs from a previous literary play slot called *Festival* (BBC TV, 1963-64) which Luke had produced. One was a Scottish-themed play, *Mr Douglas* (wr.: John Prebble; dir.: Gilchrist Calder, tx. 25.11.64), concerning the presence of Bonnie Prince Charlie in London at the time of the Coronation of King George III: a historical drama, therefore, not a contemporary play. For further detail on how MacTaggart and Newman helped transform BBC TV drama at this time, see Cook, 'Between Grierson and Barnum'.

<sup>23</sup> Wake quotes MacTaggart's June 1965 appraisal by then Head of BBC TV Plays, Michael Bakewell: 'in the course of the year [he] has done a great deal to give the whole conception of the single play in television a considerable face lift'.

<sup>24</sup> One other MacTaggart-produced *Wednesday Play* was transmitted later on: the appropriately titled *Way Off Beat* (wr.: David Turner; dir.: Toby Robertson, tx. 08.06.66).

<sup>25</sup> Lee, 'The Wednesday Play'.

<sup>26</sup> *A Knight in Tarnished Armour* drew on Sharp's own background of having left work in the shipyards of Greenock as a teenager to spend a short period working as an assistant to a private detective. See Anon., 'Alan Sharp'.

<sup>27</sup> Richardson, 'Champion Monster'.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase is taken from Newman's original brief to James MacTaggart when he appointed the latter in April 1964 to head up the BBC's contemporary TV play slot. Such 'turning points', to Newman's mind, might include: 'the relationship between a son and a father; a parishioner and his priest; a trade union official and his boss'. See Cook, 'The Wednesday Play', 2512.

<sup>29</sup> See Cook, *Dennis Potter*, 35-37.

<sup>30</sup> Other examples of *Wednesday Plays* set in the nations and regions were *Cemented with Love* (tx. 05.05.65) set in Northern Ireland and *Blodwen, Home from Rachel's Marriage* (tx. 30.04.69), partially set in Wales.

<sup>31</sup> After MacTaggart, these London appointees were (principally): Peter Luke (January to June 1966), Lionel Harris (November 1966 to May 1967), and Irene Shubik and Graeme McDonald, who shared principal production duties on *The Wednesday Play* for the remainder of its run and then oversaw its transition to *Play for Today*. Tony Garnett managed to acquire a unique status for himself within the BBC, developing his own hard-hitting material and producing only a few *Wednesday Plays* each year, shot on film: for further on this, see Shubik, *Play for Today*, 60. Thus any "nations and regions" material shown in the slot was developed and produced from London: Maclaren's BBC Scotland work was the only exception.

<sup>32</sup> Milne, 'BBC Scotland: A Progress Report'.

<sup>33</sup> See Reynolds, 'Television'.

<sup>34</sup> Anon., 'Where The Young Grow Up Quickly'.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Anon., 'Pharic Maclaren'.

<sup>37</sup> *Watching Ourselves: Sixty Years of TV in Scotland* (Hopscotch Films for BBC Scotland), Series 2, Episode 1, 'Swashbuckled' (tx. 23.12.12).

<sup>38</sup> Anon., 'Big Build-Up of Drama at BBC Scotland'.

<sup>39</sup> Anon., 'Pharic Maclaren'.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Anon., 'Bryden Named Head of Drama'.

<sup>42</sup> Hunter, 'Committed Drama'.

<sup>43</sup> A deliberate turn towards contemporary material was a move in keeping with a more general trend as the costs of TV drama production rose in the 1980s. In 1982, Roderick Graham had already indicated an intention for BBC Scotland to produce more contemporary drama reflecting what was going on in Scotland in the eighties. See Anon., 'BBC Scotland Looks to Contemporary Drama'.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander quoted in Petrie, *Screening Scotland*, 140. Alexander directed *Dreaming* for BBC Scotland (tx. 24.03.91) from a screenplay by William McIlvanney based on the latter's 1989 short story, 'Walking Wounded'.

<sup>45</sup> Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions*, 21. McDougall had, however, worked with commercial broadcaster Scottish Television (STV) on a single-film drama about the convicted murderer, Jimmy Boyle: *A Sense of Freedom* (dir.: John MacKenzie, tx. 17.02.81).

<sup>46</sup> Flynn, 'Sun Team Set to Shine Again on BBC's *Buffalo*'. Originally, Bryden was going to direct the McDougall play himself but due to illness had to pass the reins to Ian Knox.

<sup>47</sup> Issues with the broadcast unions meant the BBC, however, was still some years off from being able to follow the Channel Four model completely and make films for general theatrical release. *Screen Two* ran as a titled slot on BBC2 from 1985 – 97 and was joined in 1989 by its sister BBC1 slot, *Screen One* (1989 – 97).

<sup>48</sup> Anon., 'We Haven't Got Contemporary Plays Sorted Out: DG Interview'.

<sup>49</sup> Anon., 'It's *Play for Today* Again'. In the same year as the announcement of *Play for Today*'s prospective return, the BBC also launched a minor single play slot for BBC-2 called *Screenplay*. This ran mostly in the summer months from 1986 to 1993, with many of the plays being shot cheaply on less expensive video on account of their more theatrical, writer-led or experimental content.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Barrow, 'In The Beginning Was The Script'. After being appointed Head of BBC Plays in early 1984, Goodchild had helped spearhead a move to all-film drama, declaring in January 1987 that 'today a commercially-minded BBC drama department is very much an international film-making concern'.

<sup>51</sup> In June 1986, Goodchild had explained his decision to rest *Play for Today* thus: 'I think it just had to be rested. It had a slightly tired feel'. Anon., 'It's *Play for Today* Again'.

<sup>52</sup> This BBC syndrome of hiving off formats London deems "archaic" so that the nations and regions bear the main risk of any revival can also be seen in the case of handing over the 2005 revival of *Doctor Who* to Wales. But unlike Scotland and the contemporary single TV play in the late 1980s, the revival of *Doctor Who* proved a runaway audience success, instantly transforming the fortunes of BBC TV drama production in Wales and with knock-on consequences for the relative fortunes of BBC Scotland.

<sup>53</sup> Numbers of *Play on Ones* in subsequent seasons were ten in 1989 (21.02.89 – 25.04.89) and six plays each in 1990 and 1991 (20.07.90 – 30.08.90 and 25.07.91 – 29.08.91 respectively). The latter two seasons were also networked in the high summer: a sure sign of a loss of network confidence in the slot. Later in the 1990s, Bill Bryden's successor, Andrea Calderwood, reoriented the BBC Scotland TV Drama Department away from single TV plays and towards popular returning series and feature films, with some notable successes in each case: *Hamish MacBeth* (1995-1997) and the Oscar-winning *Mrs Brown* (1997). See Cook 'Three Ring Circus, 117.

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<sup>54</sup> Examples included: *Heartland* (wr.: Steve Gough; dir.: Kevin Billington, tx. 21.02.89) and *Unexplained Laughter* (wr.: Alun Owen; dir.: Gareth Davies, tx. 25.04.89) from Wales and *A Master of the Marionettes* (wr.: Guy Hibbert; dir. Pedr James; tx 18.04.89) from Pebble Mill.

<sup>55</sup> Hebert, 'An Eye for an Eye'.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> The plays were, respectively: *Separation* (tx. 23.08.90); *Unexplained Laughter* (tx. 25.04.89); *Heartland* (tx. 21.02.89); *These Foolish Things* (tx. 28.02.89); and *Out of the Blue* (tx. 22.08.91), which starred both Firth and Zeta-Jones.

<sup>58</sup> Griffiths, foreword to Tulloch, *Television Drama*, ix. An adaptation of Griffiths' 1973 theatre play *The Party* was produced by BBC Scotland for the first season of *The Play on One* (tx. 08.03.88). Set during the student protests of 1968, the TV version was produced to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of those events.

<sup>59</sup> Owen and Plater had made prominent contributions to *Armchair Theatre* (ITV, 1956-74) and *The Wednesday Play / Play for Today* respectively. Their respective contributions to *The Play on One* were *Unexplained Laughter* (see note 54 above) and *Misterioso* (tx. 25.07.91).

<sup>60</sup> Davies had been Dennis Potter's director on *The Wednesday Play* in the 1960s, while both Davis and Battersby had contributed to *Play for Today* in the nineteen seventies. Battersby was notoriously blacklisted in the nineteen seventies from working in BBC Drama on account of his membership during this period of the Workers' Revolutionary Party. He only returned to working for BBC Drama from the mid-1980s, but at the start of the 1990s found a welcoming home at BBC Scotland, directing two political dramas for *The Play on One* slot: *Yellowbacks* (tx. 30.08.90) and *Escape to Kampala* (tx. 08.08.91).

<sup>61</sup> Daniel Boyle was a Greenock-born writer who had made his TV writing debut a year earlier as one of the writers on the BBC Scotland six-part comedy drama TV serial, *Playing for Real*, about a Falkirk Subbuteo team. He went on to write episodes for *Inspector Morse* (ITV, 1987-2000) and *Hamish MacBeth*.

<sup>62</sup> For further discussion of *Night Mail*'s integrationist narrative in terms of the film's positioning of Scotland within a unified British national culture, see Petrie, *Screening Scotland*, 100.

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